

Morality: Six Foundations

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Over the past year, I've spent more time than in the past pondering morality. My thoughts have been stimulated by my concern about Americans' deepening division into tribes that judge the country, the world, and life itself very differently. That's not new, of course. Contrasting opinions about what is virtuous and what is not have always existed among humans, including here in America, through every era of our history, with entrenched beliefs and assumptions in direct conflict, often violently. The American Civil War is the most striking example of moral conflicts within our country that defied cooperation and compromise and resisted all attempts at gradual resolution, until the issues finally came to blows in a prolonged explosion of armed conflict and widespread suffering. That war ended, but the underlying racial, economic, and political issues continue to this day.

Is life in America and the world getting better or worse? Compelling arguments can be made on both sides of that question. What is not in question is our disunity. Once again, Americans find ourselves in deep conflict about who we are as a people and how we should live as a nation. Through much of the second half of the 20th century, our conflicts simmered beneath the surface, boiling over most obviously during the 1960s, through disagreements about culture, race, and America's international stance (mainly through the Vietnam war). Astrologically, that decade is linked to the 2010s as uniquely provocative periods of disunity.

The current decade differs from the 1960s in many ways, of course, one of which was presaged by the passage of Pluto through Sagittarius from 1995–2007. Symbolically, that period marked the end of public consensus and civil social discourse, in effect the death of cooperation and compromise. Our current descent into tribalism has roots in both of those previous periods.

The 2016 Presidential campaign and election was the trigger that brought our contentions and divisions into bold relief. The election didn't cause our disagreements, but it did rip away any remaining veneer of false unity. I wouldn't suggest that Trump's victory was a good thing for America, but I do believe that something like it was bound to occur. If we are to move forward collectively (rather than disintegrate), we need to acknowledge where we are, however painful that reality may be. And we are now openly grappling with that.

How is morality relevant to all this? I've written often over the past year about the dynamics of Us-versus-Them. Human beings are hard-wired to accept and love Us, but also to reject and condemn Them, sometimes with extreme prejudice. I don't see that aspect of human nature changing any time soon, so my interest is in increasing those we include as Us, while decreasing those we exclude as Them. A better understanding of morality, I thought, might offer relevant insights about how to move in that direction.

Our current tribalism in politics and culture is not merely divisive. Often it breeds hatred. The paradox is that people who disagree intensely about what is virtuous and what is not may all be acting morally, but the moral values that underlie their respective stances are different. It turns out that morality is not necessarily the same from one person to another, one group to another, and one culture to another. Six Foundations of Morality, first proposed by psychologist Jonathan Haidt and now commonly used in the academic field of moral psychology, shed light on this dilemma.

Below are the six foundations, followed by a brief discussion of each:

1. care versus harm

This primarily feeling-based value means that our caring for and about others is virtuous, correct, and good, and that we should refrain from harming others, which is wrong and bad.

Of the six axes, care versus harm is far and away the single value most traditionally and commonly associated with moral conscience, and from both religious and secular perspectives. Caring for and about others and, conversely, not harming them, is the bedrock of moral concerns. "Love thy neighbor" belongs within this value, as do many other spiritual concerns about compassion and forgiveness, whether as admonitions or gentler recommendations. It emphasizes the heart rather than the mind. If a universal presumption exists in the moral realm, it is that of caring for others and not harming them.

The questions of what exactly constitutes care (love) and harm can be argued, and have been — endlessly. But this first and most important value axis is not primarily about defining how to care and not harm, nor about the many unintended or inadvertent repercussions that may result in care becoming harm. No, the care versus harm axis is about *intention* and *motivation* rather than later complications or twisted results.

This value is also where empathy and sympathy reside, but that is sometimes problematic. Humans can and often do feel compassion and empathy or sympathy for others, but do nothing. The impulse to behave with care rather than harm tends to carry two prerequisite conditions. One is through local, face-to-face, interpersonal experience (although virtual experience online or via television can also make people seem more real to us). The other type of connectedness is within group affiliations of belonging, in which we identify ourselves as members. This means that we are more inclined to actively behave in a caring manner for others with whom we feel a personal connection, and especially those who represent "Us," rather than others we see as "Them."

The ultimate goal of morality (in all six values) lies in promoting virtuous behavior. The expression of feelings through action is what matters most.

2. liberty versus oppression

This value is about our hatred of bullies. It means that we should respect others' liberty (freedom) and refrain from oppressing them. The value places strong emphasis on equality and social justice. Rejection, shaming, or social punishment of oppressors is also inherent in this value. In modern civilization, and especially in cultures such as America, this value is only slightly less important than care rather than harm.

A problem with this value is that both liberty and oppression carry different meanings for different groups along the spectrum from individualism to collectivism. "Negative liberty" means no interference, especially from government — in effect, the freedom to be left alone to do as one wishes — and is typically embraced by conservatives and even more fervently by libertarians. "Positive liberty" is the assumption that a correct role of government should be to protect the freedom of individuals and groups, and is typically embraced by liberals and progressives.

As a result, the liberty versus oppression axis is a source of disagreement and conflict. Despite that, it remains high in the hierarchy of moral values.

3. fairness versus cheating

This value is about reciprocity and cooperation within groups. It means that virtue requires acting fairly toward others and not cheating or otherwise taking unfair advantage. Also, this axis implies that we should respect and reward others who act fairly and, conversely, reject, shame, or punish cheaters.

The value is about proportionality (the idea of "just desserts" or getting what one deserves) rather than equality (treating everyone the same). Concern with equality is more naturally linked with the liberty/oppression axis.

4. loyalty versus betrayal

This value means that we should be honorable and steadfast in our relationships with others and refrain from reneging on our commitments or renouncing our allegiances. In other words, promises are binding contracts.

The axis is conservative in application, emphasizing respect for elders — parents, teachers, and leaders — as well as patriotism and self-sacrifice for the good of one's group.

5. authority versus subversion

This value means that we should respect authority and not subvert the hierarchical roles within our groups — from families, through communities, to nations.

Like loyalty/betrayal, the authority/subversion axis is distinctly conservative, based on reverence for tradition in culture. Permanence is seen as good; disruptive change is not. The axis values the past and lobbies for maintaining the status quo.

6. sanctity versus degradation

This means that we should think, feel, and behave in ways that honor the values we deem sacred and holy in our cultures and ourselves and not descend into the profane or craven.

Of the six axes, sanctity/degradation is the most clearly tied to religion and issues of purity or impurity (either transcendent or mundane). Throughout much of history, the sacred versus the profane was the working definition of morality.

All six of the value axes apply to our thoughts, emotions, and particularly to our behaviors. Where others are concerned, only their behaviors are correctly open to our moral judgments (since we can't know with certainty their thoughts or feelings).

Questions arise, however. How should we react and respond to correct expressions of moral virtue by ourselves or by others? Should we approve, affirm, and celebrate virtuous behavior? Almost certainly. Should we reward it? That's more complicated. Do rewards sully the good deeds? Is virtue its own reward?

Conversely, how should we react and respond to expressions of our own and others' vices, transgressions, or immorality? Should we shame or shun the transgressors and punish the transgressions? Shaming has been a staple response within groups throughout civilization's history (both to maintain cohesion and enforce conformity within the group), and is often effective, but shunning provides no avenue for contrition, remorse, or reform. And yet, shunning is employed in certain groups as an enforced response to immorality. Should we punish transgressions? That raises the specter of whether punishment itself is immoral (violating both the care/harm and liberty/oppression axes).

The six foundations reveal sources of conflict between individuals and groups over what constitutes moral behavior. Within each value scale, differences of understanding often exist. Care versus harm can be interpreted in many ways. What one person feels to be caring may be regarded as harmful by another. If I'm an environmentalist, I probably feel that government regulations to limit pollution by business (and thus protect the welfare of the public) are loving and correct. If, on the other hand, I'm a business owner who feels that economic productivity leads to the greatest good, then I'm probably opposed to regulations. Both people feel they are acting morally, yet each believes the other to be immoral. The pro-life versus pro-choice debate surrounding abortion is another example of conflicting interpretations of care versus harm or sacred versus profane.

Also, the six foundations may be emphasized differently between groups. For instance, people raised in individualistic cultures (of which America is the prime example) tend as a group to focus mainly on the first three scales: care/harm, liberty/oppression, and fairness/cheating. Within collectivist cultures, however, such as China and Japan, the latter three scales — loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and sacred/profane — tend to be given equal weight. The same distinction applies to political or cultural orientations. Liberals and progressives tend to embrace only the first three scales, while conservatives believe in all six.

Such distinctions are, of course, stereotypical generalizations. Within any group, individuals can differ widely in how they define particular moral values and emphasize the six value scales.

The divergence of moral values can and does lead to conflicts that deepen the Us/Them divide. One person may decry corruption, seeing such human fallibility as harmful and unfair (and thus immoral), while another is inclined to overlook or minimize the importance of corruption because of a greater emphasis on the moral value of loyalty and respect for authority.

Of even greater importance than the six foundations is the strong, apparently compulsive need of human beings to see ourselves as good and right, and — just as important — to be seen by others as good and right. Thus, morality is frequently enlisted (and sometimes twisted) in the service of positive self-image and, even more often, to enhance or defend our social currency — maintaining our respect in the eyes of others. Rationalization and justification are deeply embedded in the human psyche. No matter how much lip service we may pay them, honesty and truth simply can't compete. I'm not suggesting that no one is honest. Truth is very slippery, though, and the human ego is notoriously effective in infiltrating every part of our lives, even morality. Perhaps especially morality.

I'm a bit concerned that the last paragraph undercuts the central theme of this commentary, but that's my current takeaway from all the thinking and reading I've done about morality over the past year. Rather than clarifying or pointing the way toward resolution of the tribal Us/Them divide that stands in the way of our coming up with workable solutions to our collective dilemmas, morality seems to me to merely complicate that difficulty.

Whether or not that is true, I will continue to think about morality and may write more about it in the future. For now, however, this will have to suffice.